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AUTHOR Giles, Corrie
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issues that accountability-driven planning has generated for those attempting to retain ownership of their school-improvement process. It outlines five sets of contradictions, broadly relating to assumptions about planning, that become evident from a study of the planning literature: (1) short time-lines and multiple innovation will defeat rational planning; (2) long-term planning is not the same as strategic planning; (3) planning is conceived and operationalized differently by the school-improvement and school-effectiveness movements; (4) planning is part of the change process; and (5) there is not a clear view of what planning should look like in practice when faced with multiple innovations in unstable planning contexts. The paper claims that more reflection on the tension between empowerment versus control is needed in the site-based planning literature, and it attempts to identify the factors that contribute to ineffective planning. The paper analyzes why accountability in education is failing at a time when specific types of planning and planning targets are mandated as part and parcel of restructuring and reform initiatives. It also discusses rational planning, long-term planning versus strategic planning, school improvement versus school effectiveness, planning and the change process, planning in practice, and planning as an emotional experience. (Contains 29 references.) (RJM)

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CORRESPONDENCE TO

Dr. Corrie Giles,
Education Management and Administration Consultant,
25 Cedar Street, PO Box 846,
Waterdown,
Ontario,
CANADA, LOR 2HO.

Telephone (905) 689-9248
FAX (905) 689-9483

"E" mail colgiles@netaccess.on.ca

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Contradictions in Accountability: Planning and Target Setting in Schools: Doing Things Right or Doing the Right Things?

by Corrie Giles

Site-based planning, school improvement planning or institutional development planning are familiar terms which have more recently taken on new meaning in the accountability driven world of educational administration as we enter the new millennium. Relatively unheard of until the 1980's, site-based planning has been jointly championed both as a vehicle for school improvement (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991), and as a technical mechanism by the school effectiveness movement for delivering "improved standards" (Purkey and Smith, 1985; Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992). Although there is a coming together of the school improvement and school effectiveness research (Reynolds et al., 1993), I have argued previously that attempts to improve the effectiveness of site-based planning, both in England and Wales and in Ontario, have been undermined by the imposition of an externally imposed planning agenda which, of late, has included specified output targets (Giles, 1998).

In this paper I am suggesting that reflections upon the contradiction of empowerment vs control are under-represented in the site-based planning literature, and that an attempt to identify the factors contributing to ineffective planning in accountability driven times is long overdue. I will further argue that imposing a planning agenda on schools and school systems to "do the right things" is seeking too simplistic a solution to improving standards in education. What we also need to look more carefully at is how a more knowledgeable understanding of planning may help us "to do things right".

The Dead Hand of Accountability

It is tempting in proposing such an analysis to look outside the discipline of educational administration for causal factors which impact negatively upon site-based planning, in particular the relentless pace of educational reform, the changing social context of schooling, the need to increase efficiency and to raise standards, and the myriad of new initiatives which seem to require planning to some degree. However, what I propose to do in this paper is to look beyond the "dead hand of accountability", and as a starting point ask why one of the corner stones of educational administration is proving less than successful at a time when specific types of planning and planning targets are mandated as part and parcel of restructuring and reform initiatives. I am suggesting that there are five sets of contradictions, broadly relating to assumptions about planning, which become evident from a study of the planning literature and which, if more widely appreciated, may help to inform more effective professional practice.

- Short time-lines and multiple innovations will defeat rational planning every time.
- Long-term planning is not the same as strategic planning.
- Planning is conceived and operationalized differently by the school improvement and school effectiveness movements.
- Planning is part of the change process, not an administrative adjunct to the change process.
- There is not a clear view of what planning should look like in practice when faced with multiple innovations in very unstable planning contexts.

Rational Planning

Wildavsky's (1973) seminal critique of planning, "If Planning is Everything, Then Maybe It's Nothing", has particular relevance for education systems which seem to have developed a considerable faith in the ability of rational planning to deliver effective change when multiple innovations are imposed upon schools, even in very unstable environments. Wildavsky reminds us of the dangers of relying upon a step-by-step technology, elaborate written plans, and systematic feed-back mechanisms which require time to produce and evaluate results before embarking upon another round of the planning cycle. Schools and school systems need to plan strategically, are being asked to act short-term, and are then moved onto other planned improvement activities before evident progress has been made with the previous planning cycle. This endless cycle of *innovation displacement* fundamentally erodes the utility of the rational planning approach.

Long-term Planning vs Strategic Planning

In very clearly tabulating the distinctions between long-term and strategic planning, McCune (1986), together with more contemporary authors (Beare et al., 1989; Herman and Herman, 1994; Davies and Ellison, 1999), remind us of the value of the built-in flexibility of the strategic, rather than more traditional long-term planning approach used by school systems. Long-term planning lacks flexibility, is slow to respond to change, requires large data sets to inform decision-making and is out of date before implementation can occur. On the other hand, strategic planning provides broad strategic directions for an organization, whilst specific objectives are delivered as opportunities arise using either externally imposed or internally developed initiatives.

However, so strong has been the accountability driven planning agenda, that even in decentralized education systems, a sense of strategic directions tends to reside (if at all!) in ministries of education, and can lack transparency. As a result, school boards perceive that they are merely left with tactical and operational decisions, with very limited choices over what they can do, and schools are left with very little choice how they attempt to plan to "do it" (Wallace, 1991). Planning without a clear sense of strategic direction is pointless.

School Improvement vs School Effectiveness

Planning is conceived of and operationalized differently by the school improvement and school effectiveness movements. School improvement planning is seen as a contextually sensitive approach to planning, which identifies specific issues for improvement at an individual school site (Hargreaves and Hopkins 1991; West and Ainscow, 1991). The school improvement planning *process* is considered to be as important as the final planning product, in that the process seeks to engage faculty, students and the local community in a process which engenders commitment to the implementation of collective improvement goals - goals which are determined by collaborative and collegial activity.

What was less clear in the earlier work of the school improvement movement was the value of linking the process of improvement to specific measurable outcomes, an approach favoured by the school effectiveness movement. However, the outcome orientation of the school effectiveness literature *assumed* that an appropriate planning process was extant. As a result of this and other assumptions the widespread failure of board-wide schools effectiveness projects was widely reported in the literature from the United States (Arends, 1982; Crandall et al., 1986; Levine and Leibert, 1987). Researchers variously found that initiation and implementation failure was due to school boards attempting standardized approaches which did not take into account the context of individual schools, the lack of ownership of the improvement goals proposed by the state or school board, and the very different lengths of time individual schools took to mobilize, initiate and to begin to become comfortable with planning change.

What has become apparent as the two schools of thought move closer together is that accountability has introduced a fundamental contradiction in the planning process. The inclusive nature of school improvement planning had the advantage of being sensitive to the improvement needs and pace of change appropriate to individual schools. When well managed, school improvement planning incorporated strategies which were inclusive, collegial and potentially motivational for the staff who were ultimately charged with implementation. However, accountability, particularly of a measurable kind, was weak.

On the other hand, the setting of external benchmarks, standards, targets and outcome based assessments, favoured by the school effectiveness research has "squeezed out" the planning time for internal improvement issues, reduced the motivational impact of working towards collective whole-school improvement initiatives, and further balkanizes the profession by seeking to improve measurable subject or grade-level outcomes, rather than support a process of whole-school improvement. Site-based planning should be capable of supporting more improvement, not less.

Planning and the Change Process

Indeed, the significance of linking school improvement initiatives with the effective school

research was recognized some time ago by Sackney (1986), and operationalized by the Halton School Board in Ontario over an eight-year period. Halton created a functional synergy between school improvement, school effectiveness, site-based planning (school growth planning), change and leadership theory, which also took into account the need to motivate staff, retain sensitivity to the individual needs of schools, develop agreed strategic planning directions that could be bought into system-wide, and provide the resources and support necessary to initiate, implement and sustain change over time (Stoll and Fink, 1992; 1994; 1996). Halton succeeded by integrating planning into the change and school improvement process. Significantly, planning was treated as an *innovation* in its own right (Constable, 1994). System-wide training in school improvement planning was provided to principals, school improvement teams and faculty. Consultants were available to work in schools, and with schools, on supporting the development of a planning process for individual sites. In Halton, planning was *integral* to the change process, not an administrative *adjunct* to the change process. However, contemporary changes in Ontario relating to raising standards, improving efficiency and making school systems accountable for their use of resources, have made it difficult to maintain the Halton planning approach.

Planning in Practice

Recent experience in England and Wales and in Ontario suggests that in times of great turbulence and multiple innovations planning is unlikely to succeed in the step-by-step rational cycle advocated in the prevailing school planning literature (Skelton et al., 1991; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991; Davies and Ellison, 1992; Herman and Herman, 1994; Giles, 1997). To a large degree, rational planning requires a rational planning context in which to succeed. The reality experienced by schools and school systems is far from rational:

- Planning goals are continuously displaced by new initiatives mandated by forces external to the school system.
- Mandated goals leave little time for the self-improvement goals of individual schools.
- Resources are being reduced to improve efficiency in parallel with demands for greater accountability. Yet planning models, particularly in North America, are predicated upon the availability of resources to support the planning process - in particular time, training and consultants.
- Planning for accountability has multiple dimensions - planning is the process for raising standards; planning is the process by which schools are held accountable for their use of resources; planning is the means by which schools meet a wide range of programming demands, including special needs, social exclusion and gifted and able students. Planning fatigue is a practical reality not yet recognized in the planning literature.
- Planning is required to meet a wide range of effective student needs, with affective needs being sidelined.

Rational planning also requires the commitment of motivated and engaged principals and teachers. However, the displacement of the school improvement approach to site-based planning, by the mandated output orientation of the school effectiveness approach, largely ignores the human element in planning for improvement. Planning for improvement requires an *emotional commitment* from those responsible for initiating, implementing and sustaining change.

Planning as an Emotional Experience

Indeed, Hargreaves (1994) had previously questioned the efficacy of site-based planning as an effective means of managing change, because the conditions under which principals and teachers are expected to plan do not support the gestation of the positive *emotional commitment* necessary for planning to be really effective. Recent work by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England on school planning supports this view:

> "Not surprisingly, the greatest influence was found to be the feelings of the teachers in the school. This worked both ways: the commitment and willingness of staff to make the changes was felt by headteachers [principals] to be by far the greatest asset in implementing the action plan ..." (Maychell and Pathak, 1997).

Given that Fullan (1991) and Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) have also argued that it is difficult to mandate what matters in education, externally imposed planning agendas that continue to ignore the emotional needs of teachers will continue to erode the capacity of schools for self improvement.

Rather than requiring schools to conform to externally imposed targets linked to artificial benchmarks and performance standards, it would be better for those responsible for imposing change on school systems and schools to become aware of the contradictory assumptions inherent in rational approaches to site-based planning in turbulent times. What is clear is that requiring schools to "plan the right things" without ministries of education and school boards being knowledgeable about how schools can be more effective planners by "planning things right" is futile.

Conclusion

This analysis has probably raised more questions than it has answered in attempting to explore in general terms the contradictions which accountability driven planning has generated for those attempting to retain ownership of their school improvement process. three broad areas emerge as warranting further research:

- Has the drive to improve standards by means of a site-based planning and an

externally imposed target setting process disenfranchised schools wishing to retain their own whole school improvement planning agenda?

- What are the fundamental difficulties with the site-based planning approach if external accountability issues dominate the planning agenda of schools?
- What do we need to know, and what issues do we have to resolve if site-based planning is to continue to receive the support of teachers and administrators, rather than become a mere technical adjunct of an externally imposed administrative agenda?

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